

Defence Planning Committee (DPC) *Optimising Expectations*

by Anil Ahuja



Introduction

The recent announcement by the government of a "Defence Planning Committee" (DPC), chaired by the National Security Advisor (NSA), has evoked mixed reactions. Some have welcomed this as a long overdue step that will improve the process of India's defence planning and capability development. Others view this as yet another committee, like Committee for Defence Planning (1977), or an upgraded version of DGDPS (Directorate General of Defence Planning Staff, 1986) that failed to meet their desired goals. There are still others who have objected to the appointment of the NSA as the *de facto* Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The DPC marks a concrete step forward to bring rigour to defence planning and provide strategic guidance to the Ministry of Defence in the areas of capability development and strengthening military industrial complex.

The ultimate success of the newly constituted DPC will depend on identifying an appropriate place for it within the established organisational structures and laying down realistic expectations from it. The DPC is neither meant to be a "senior officials forum of the CCS" nor a "super COSC or DAC". It also is no substitute for eventually appointing a CDS or permanent Chairman, COSC. It is meant to reinforce the existing organisational structures through an inter-ministerial coordination mechanism to provide direction on matters of policy planning for national defence and security.

Defence Planning Committee – As Constituted

The DPC has been set up with the aim of formulating India's National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy, and providing synergised policy direction to the capability development of the armed forces. It is chaired by the NSA (first meeting held on May 3, 2018) and includes the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC); Service Chiefs; as well as Defence, Foreign and Expenditure Secretaries as members. The Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman COSC (CISC) is the Member Secretary and HQ, Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) has been mandated to provide the Secretariat.

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh
Director General

The DPC is to have four sub-committees:

- **Policy and Strategy** Subcommittee: to carry out threat appraisals of external security risks and define defence and security priorities.
- **Planning and Capability Development** Subcommittee: to create a capability development plan and monitor its timely implementation; seek Cabinet approvals for budgetary support for approved programmes; and to forge synergies between different ministries on matters related to defence and security.
- **Defence Diplomacy** Subcommittee: to evaluate foreign policy objectives; create a complementary defence engagement strategy; and identify foreign acquisitions and sales to achieve strategic leverage.
- **Defence Manufacturing** Subcommittee: to draft a comprehensive policy for R&D; prepare a roadmap for indigenisation; and formulate policy and create a structural framework to boost defence exports.

Expectations from the DPC

Periodic reviews of national security structures and of the effectiveness of the armed forces have highlighted serious gaps in the planning and coordination process, which the DPC must address.

- **Provision of strategic direction to the national security planning process.** A sense of direction is required for evaluating India's security environment and carry out a comprehensive analysis of external and internal security threats. This would place in perspective issues such as the magnitude of a two/two-and-a-half front threat, under nuclear overhang; likely reaction time and visualised duration of possible conflicts for which the nation needs to prepare; inter-se relationship of threats in the continental and maritime domains; extent of regional responsibilities India must prepare for; geographic extent of such responsibility in the maritime domain; and the inter-se relevance of island territories and aircraft carriers. The national security strategy and the national defence strategy would hopefully emanate from

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these considerations and would thereafter constitute strategic guidance to all relevant ministries and organs of the government. This in turn would determine the priorities of force structuring, acquisitions and budgetary allocation to the armed forces. This is the most significant task that the DPC must undertake since clarity on these issues has proved elusive for over 70 years.

- **Overall Policy Planning.** Addressing national defence and security concerns is a synergised function of diplomacy, military, intelligence and other agencies. Some threats are better dealt diplomatically or economically or by employing available 'leverages'. The armed forces need to be

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provided a larger perspective of inter-se responsibilities and in fact should be partners in determining these. The DPC must become a forum for evolving this synergised approach and tasking various organs of the state. It should also give an opportunity for the armed forces' leadership to participate in the overall planning for national security and for this body to benefit from their inputs, a mutually

enriching proposition.

- **Capability Development.** Having arrived at a common perspective of India's security environment and agreed upon what threats and challenges may need to be dealt with militarily on continental or maritime domains, it would become possible for the Services and the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) to evolve an appropriate military strategy and identify critical voids in our capabilities. The acquisitions approved by the DAC can thereafter be prioritised and budgetary support assured through the Ministry of Finance. The DPC must consider capability development in the cyber, space and

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technology domains, which remains divided across different ministries presently. It must also ensure that capability development between the armed forces and the CAPFs / PMFs is optimised to avoid wasteful expenditure.

- **Defence Diplomacy.** Defence and security cooperation with India's partners is a vital component of overall diplomatic relations. It is also relevant in the context of the armed forces identifying possible sources of crucial weapon systems and technologies as well as potential defence export destinations. The DPC should play an anchoring role in such decision making. It must also calibrate desired levels of military cooperation, joint exercises, intelligence exchange and inter-operability with India's identified strategic partners.

Headquarters IDS has been mandated to provide the Secretariat for the DPC. Though presently this may be the best available option, it is not the most optimum solution. The DPC would need a more representative secretariat to be effective, with representation from all agencies with a role in defence and security policy. This would also require internal strengthening of HQ IDS and an interface with the NSCS (National Security Council Secretariat).

DPC: Areas of Caution

A body of this nature comprising of senior officials with already stretched charters of responsibility can only provide a vital sense of direction if it is focused and selective about the issues to be addressed by it. The temptation to independently take on issues such as rushed decisions on major acquisitions; re-sizing of any of the Services; creation of 'Theatre Commands' etc., should be avoided. While these may create the perception of expedited decision making, in the long run it may turn out to be detrimental to national security interests.

A few areas where the DPC would do well to exercise caution and avoid assuming unilateral authority are listed below:

- **Appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff.** The DPC is no substitute for integration and strengthening of the higher defence organisation structures. In fact, the quality of decisions by the DPC would improve with better analysed internal inputs from the armed forces, which the CDS can facilitate. The DPC should support, rather than attempting to be a substitute for this process.

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- **Assuming the Role of the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC).** Notwithstanding national frustration over the slow pace of acquisitions, this is not the answer. The DAC mechanism includes well-structured and robust "feeder committees" (Capital Acquisition Categorisation Committees and Defence Procurement Board) to thoroughly scrutinise high value procurements from different perspectives. Circumventing this scrutiny, even in good faith, is undesirable and fraught with risk. It is worth recalling here that DAC approval in itself is not the cause of delays in acquisitions. The primary problem is follow-up action and matching budgetary allocations. The DPC would do well to support implementation of DAC decisions by facilitating, through the CCS, appropriate categorisation of select acquisitions for "strategic considerations", facilitating timely budgetary support and assisting in clearance of immense backlogs.

- **Energising Defence Manufacturing.** While a subcommittee has been constituted for this purpose, the likely contribution of the DPC in this field would be marginal and in fact should remain so. "Make in India" is a poster programme of the government of which defence manufacturing is a crucial component, but the issues involved are specific and internal to the MOD and the Services. These are related to coordination between the three Services, Department of Defence Production, the Director General Acquisition (placed in the Department of Defence), DRDO, Defence Finance, DPSUs and private industry. This also is a function of the urgency of acquisitions, quest for indigenisation, promotion of start-ups/ MSMEs, incubation of technology etc. Endeavours at "quick fix solutions" by directives from the DPC are likely to be counterproductive. While the DPC may play a monitoring role to iron out issues of dissonance

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and to seek accountability for inordinate delays, assuming control of this facet by the DPC would not be desirable.

Conclusion

The creation of the DPC is a welcome initiative to give a unified sense of direction to all stakeholders vested with the responsibility of national security. It also institutionally involves the Ministry of Finance as a partner in policy planning for defence and force structuring.

The DPC mechanism gives a place and a voice to the military leadership on issues of national security and enables the armed forces to remain oriented to and prepared for countering contemporary threats. The Committee will draw its strength and continued relevance if it works effectively as a coordinating body and acts as a force multiplier for existing institutional structures, and desists from presenting itself as an overarching committee for providing solutions to all matters of defence and security. It is imperative to provide the DPC robust secretarial support with multi-agency, defence and security oriented staffing. While the ultimate responsibility for ensuring national defence rests with the Ministry of Defence, the DPC can provide a sound basis for defence and security policy making, preparedness and capability development.

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